

# Radio, democracy, development

by Charles Arthur

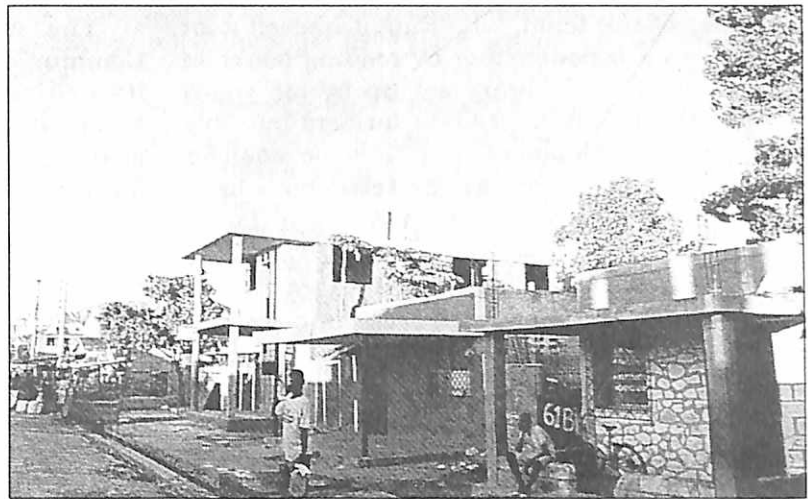
## Haiti: a tale of two radios

"Radio Unity - 99.5 FM - working together with the people of St Michel for democracy and development." This is the call sign used by a new community radio station broadcasting to a remote countryside region of central Haiti.

Jacky Jean Louis is one of 10 volunteers who run Radio Unity from a shack in the small town of St Michel de l'Attalaye. Jacky explains that, as well as international news, Radio Unity broadcasts programmes of national and local news to an area with an estimated population of 30,000 people. This is a vital service, as St Michel and the surrounding countryside lie between two vast mountain ranges that block the signal from radio stations based in the country's cities. According to Jacky, "Before Radio Unity was inaugurated in October 1995, news traveled entirely by word of mouth."

The station director, Antoine Jacob, is quick to point out that Radio Unity is 'not just a news station', but is radio created by, and designed for, the community it serves.

The daily broadcasts, 17.00-20.00hrs. (when people are home from work), are a mix of news, music, and programmes addressing women's issues, farming matters, sex education, and health problems. Listeners are



Radio Sel, Haiti

Leah Gordon

invited to come to the station in person with their ideas and reactions, which, Antoine proudly boasts, have been very positive.

The station is run by a coalition of 11 grassroots organisations based in and around the town of St Michel. Jacky and Antoine are both members of peasant organisations.

Other members of the coalition are the local branch of the national women's organisation, a school students' association, and the local base Christian community group of the Catholic church. These organisations, which have an estimated total membership of 3,500, nominate their representatives to a committee that runs Radio Unity. Members of these organisations contribute the money to rent the station premises and to pay for the diesel fuel for the generator that powers the home-made 40 watts

transmitter.

This participation of the community in the management and control of the radio station has been encouraged by the Haitian non-government organisation, Centre for Research and Action for Development (CRAD), based in the capital Port-au-Prince.

Antoine recounts how, once the coalition came together, CRAD helped with information and training on how to run a station, and how to develop community involvement." CRAD also agreed to provide a new 100 watt transmitter that will enable Radio Unity to broadcast a stronger signal to a wider area.

Established for over a year and with new equipment promised, the prospects for Radio Unity look bright. However, Jacky's story highlights a problem experienced by a station run by volunteers. He is an enthusiastic member of the team, who taught himself a lot about radio broadcasting by reading books in the small school library set up by his youth group. His family is peasant farmers but only own a very small plot of land. "It is too small for me to work it as well as my relations. I look, but I can't find work in this area," says Jacky. He concedes that now, at the age of 25, it seems inevitable that he will have to go to the neighbouring Dominican Republic to find employment and make a living. If this happens, Radio Unity will lose a trained and experienced young broadcaster.

The issues of poverty and lack of opportunities in Haiti are acknowledged by Paul Louis-Justem the coordinator of another community radio station, assisted by CRAD, in the city of Gonaives. Paul believes that Radio Sel, based in the seaside slum area of Raboteau, must work not only on the level of popular education, but also be an active instrument of the political struggle to change the structure of Haitian society. "Radio Sel is for the lower classes, the poor people. It is not for profit, but to advance their struggle," Paul says. He hopes that, as well as informing and educating the community, "the station will help the people around here to organise meetings and demonstrations."

The district of Raboteau suffered great repression for its opposition to the Duvalier and military dictatorships and for its support for the development of a genuine participatory democracy.

Paul is a member of a grassroots youth

organisation in Raboteau, that, together with 13 other groups from Gonaives and the surrounding area has created a coalition to run Radio Sel. The station building has two newly fitted studios, a tall antenna on the roof and a 100 watt transmitter, again provided by CRAD.

The station has been named Sel—the Creole for salt—because the production of salt from evaporated seawater is long-established in the area. The name has another resonance that Paul knows the local people understand. Salt is an essential life-giving force—just like community radio.

Charles Arthur is the editor of *HAITI BRIEFING*, the newsletter of the Haiti Support Group, based in London. He is the author of *After the Dance, the Drum is Heavy* (1995), a book analysing Haiti in the year following U.S. intervention.

The World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) assists CRAD under its Critical Situations Fund. WACC critical situations projects are funded with the support of the German church agency, Evangelisches Missionswerk (EMW).

## Philippines: radio skills for migrant workers

Filipino migrant workers are learning to use radio to break their isolation and fight exploitation by ruthless overseas bosses who hire them as domestics, or in construction and industrial jobs.

Leaders of Filipino migrant workers organisations from Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Canada, the U.S. and Europe learned how to put together their own radio programmes at a recent workshop in Quezon City, Philippines.

The workshop was organised by the Asia-Pacific Mission for Migrant Filipinos and supported by WACC and the German church agency EMW under the WACC Media Training Fund.

Participants returned to their 'adopted countries' armed with a basic module on news writing and programme-making for use in their rights and welfare work.

Reprinted from *Action* No. 197, June 1997